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OFFICIAL PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Friday, Jan. 30, 1978
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CITY TO SEEK WAYS TO REPAIR AND REOPEN SYMPHONY HALL

Newark city officials said today they are exploring all possible ways to repair and reopen Symphony Hall as a major cultural center.

The 3,300-seat theater is owned by the City of Newark and leased to Symphony Hall, Inc., a private organization that has announced the closing of the auditorium because of defects in the electrical system.

Newark Business Administrator William H. Walls said after a meeting this morning (Friday, Jan. 30) that the city is determined to see the theater not only reopened, but used more effectively than in the past.

"It will come back bigger and better," Walls predicted. "This is the largest and finest hall in the state, and its basic function has not been dissipated by the present problems. In addition, Symphony Hall is an essential element of the rehabilitation of the South Broad Street area."

Walls said he has formed a task force of city officials, headed by Corporation Counsel Milton Buck, to work on plans for Symphony Hall. At the same time Walls has asked Alvin Zach, director of the city's Department of Engineering, to make a complete study and cost analysis of all the needs of the 51-year-old building.

The Business Administrator stressed that the closing is temporary, and will affect only the auditorium. Other parts of the building, including the Terrace Ballroom and television station WNJU-TV, will remain in use.

It is necessary to close the auditorium, Walls said, "to insure the safety of performers and audiences." Defects have been found in the electrical system, and the cost of correcting them may be "substantial," Walls said.

"There is no question that the brilliant tradition of Symphony Hall will continue and provide a source of culture and enrichment to this city and the entire metropolitan area," Walls declared.

The new city task force will work with the business community, and various civic and cultural organizations, to assure the early reopening of the facility.

Walls noted that the city had already applied for several grants to develop an overall plan for the building. One of the grants may be forthcoming soon. The objective will be to find how Symphony Hall can better serve the needs and desires of the public.

In addition, the Mayor's Policy & Development Office has designated the Lincoln Park area as one of its prime targets for redevelopment. The city's plans for the second year of its federally funded community development program include acquisition of properties near Symphony Hall to provide additional parking. Other plans call for redevelopment of the nearby Industrial Office Building into a senior citizen residence, and the rehabilitation of Lincoln Park.

"We obviously share the concern expressed by so many in the metropolitan area about the closing of Symphony Hall," said Walls.

"The city stands ready to join with others -- enthusiastically and actively -- to make all the necessary improvements, in terms of physical rehabilitation as well as innovative programming."

He said the city's task force members, "individually as well as collectively, will represent the city's continuing interest."

During the last year the city reduced the rent for Symphony Hall to \$1 a year to help offset the operating corporation's deficits. The city has also committed \$130,000 to various capital improvement plans, including new air conditioning, roofing, and redecoration.

Walls said the electrical system has suffered from a lack of maintenance, and the troubles were found during a recent inspection of the building. There is no immediate danger, Walls said, but the wiring has a "potential unsafe characteristic." There is no indication of any electrical problems for the other portions of the building, he added.

Walls described the closing as a "temporary hibernation," and said there were only a few major evening or weekend bookings for the hall this winter and spring.

"The essential qualities of the hall are unimpaired," Walis said. City officials, he said, consider Symphony Hall the keystone for both the revitalization of Newark's cultural life, and rehabilitation of a large area of the city.

Symphony Hall was built in 1925 as the Mosque Theater at a cost of \$2.2 million, and would cost more than 10 times that amount to duplicate today. It was bought by the city in 1965 for \$240,000 and leased for 40 years to a nonprofit corporation formed by business and civic leaders.

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